

Deadline Passes in Lithuania

Leaders Question Impact of Moscow's Threatened Blockade

By Michael Dobbs
Washington Post Foreign Service

MOSCOW, April 15—Lithuanian government leaders today ignored a Kremlin ultimatum designed to force them to reverse their moves toward independence and said the Soviet leadership might have difficulty enforcing a threatened economic blockade.

A 48-hour deadline set by Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev for Lithuania to rescind legislation supporting the unilateral declaration of independence expired this evening without any attempt by either side to seek a compromise solution.

The Lithuanian government had said it would wait until Monday, after the Easter holiday weekend, to consider the Soviet leader's latest threats but also insisted that it will not back down on its March 11 declaration of independence.

Most Lithuanians have reacted with Olympian calm to the Kremlin's threat to cut off supplies of vital raw materials, including oil and natural gas, unless the Lithuanian authorities reverse many of their pro-independence decisions by today. The Lithuanian parliament is not due to reconvene until Tuesday.

In the republic's capital, Vilnius, worshipers jammed into the city cathedral to hear their Roman Catholic leader, Cardinal Vincentas Sladkevicius, urge them to keep a "cool head" but remain tough. Pope John Paul II prayed for the predominantly Catholic nation in Easter

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services in Rome, saying that he hoped their aspirations would be met through "respectful and comprehensive dialogue."

As Gorbachev's deadline expired, Lithuanian Deputy Prime Minister Romualdas Ozolas went on television to say that Lithuania had sufficient supplies of oil and gas to last until the end of the month under the worst possible scenario. But he also expressed skepticism that the Kremlin would be able to enforce the threatened blockade.

Lithuanian President Vytautas Landsbergis told reporters in Vilnius that the republic was trying to contract directly with enterprises in other parts of the Soviet Union to maintain supplies. The neighboring Baltic republics of Estonia and Latvia last week signed an economic assistance pact with Lithuania providing for mutual help in the event of emergencies.

Contacts are also reported between Lithuania and several West European countries on developing economic ties.

The Soviet Communist Party newspaper Pravda warned Western countries against coming to Lithuania's assistance, saying that it would be "reckless" to throw away the benefits that the West has derived from Gorbachev's innovative foreign policy for the sake of "Lithuanian nationalists."

A Pravda commentary said that the White House should not succumb to "rightist forces" seeking the breakup of the Soviet Union. The Pravda commentator, Tomas Kolesnichenko, praised President Bush for his "restraint" on Lithuania in the face of domestic political pressure.

In a letter Friday to Lithuanian leaders, Gorbachev expressed particular dismay over the issuing of Lithuanian identity cards, the refusal to cooperate with the annual draft into the Soviet army and the takeover of Communist Party property. He said that if these decisions were not rescinded by today, he would cut off supplies of those products that the Soviet Union is able to sell on world markets for freely convertible currency.

The Soviet Union's main export-

able commodities are oil and natural gas. Lithuania imports practically all of its energy supplies from the Soviet Union for a fraction of the world prices.

Some Lithuanian economists maintain that it would be very difficult for Moscow to cut off energy supplies to Lithuania without hurting other Soviet republics. The oil refinery at the Lithuanian port of Klaipeda on the Baltic Sea is an important supplier to both Russia and Byelorussia in addition to Lithuania.